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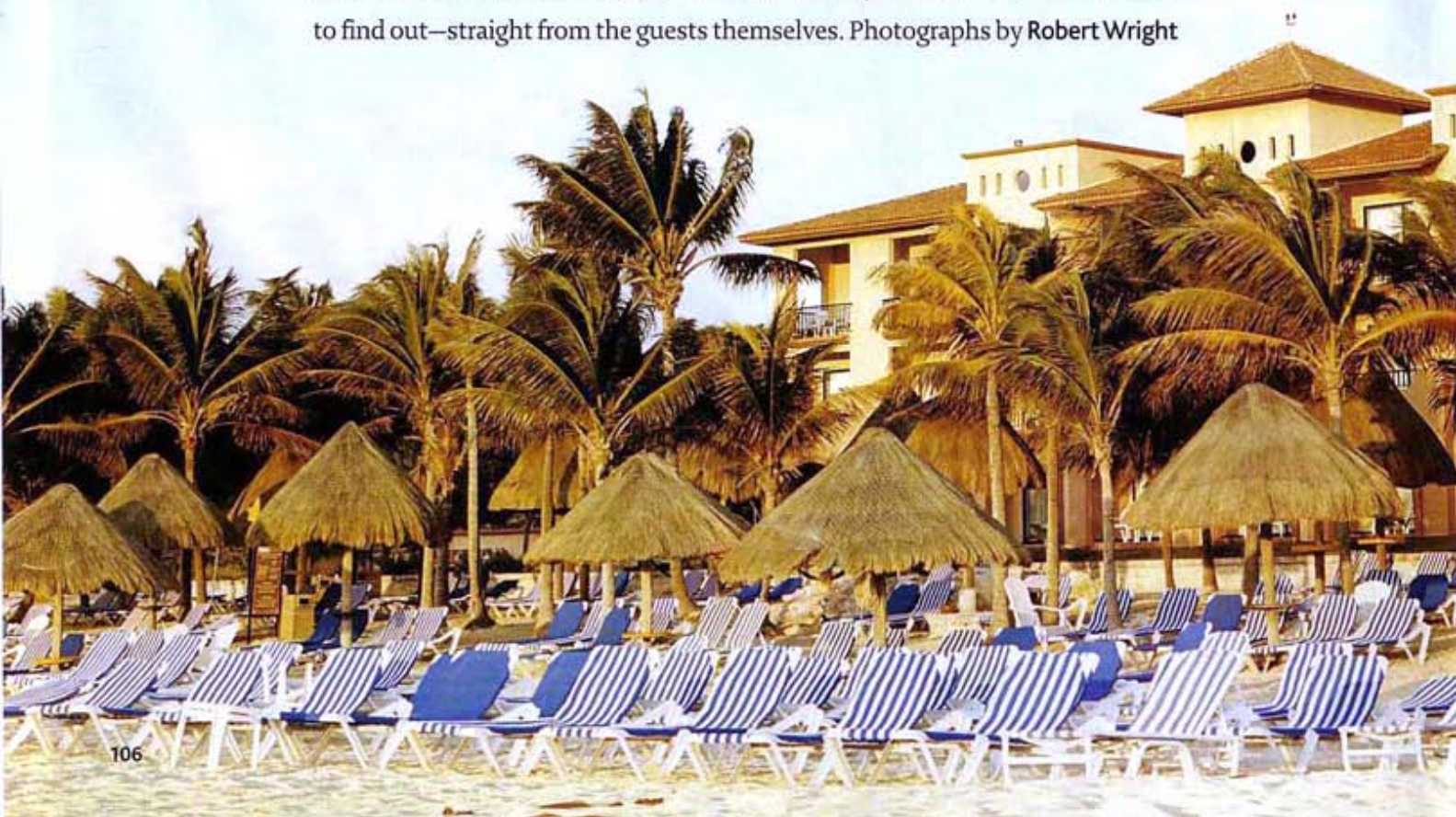


# The Easy, Breezy Riviera Maya

Five all-inclusive  
resorts on Mexico's  
Caribbean coast

After Cancún cemented its reputation as Spring Break Mecca, developers looked south to a seemingly endless expanse of powder-white beaches. Offshore was the largest reef in the Northern Hemisphere. Inland were ruins—more ancient sites than in all of Egypt. Slowly but surely, resorts popped up, first in the town of Playa del Carmen and then in smaller fish-

ing villages. Tourism officials christened this 75-mile stretch the Riviera Maya, and today it's the fastest-growing area in all of Mexico. At last count, 372 hotels offered 23,512 rooms, most of them at grand all-inclusive complexes. With swim-up bars, kind prices, loads of activities, and almost perfectly reliable weather (fine, there's some wind), the only question is: How do you choose? Josh Dean went to find out—straight from the guests themselves. Photographs by Robert Wright







Clockwise from top: Kristin Harmel, left, one of four Canadians playing a game of hearts at the adults-only pool; the sandy soccer field set up for impromptu games; one of the rooms in the Hacienda Section, which is an eight-minute walk to the shore. Opposite: There's no rush on chairs at the Gala's beach

## Gala Beach Resort

With the help of some experts, I narrowed down a long list of the most popular four- and five-star resorts. First up was the Gala Beach Resort Playacar, 45 minutes south of the Cancún airport, and the southernmost resort in the lush gated community of Playacar, home to one of only two golf courses on the entire Riviera Maya. Guests stay in one of two 150-room "hotel" buildings fronting the ocean, or in the 16 inland buildings—each with 10 suites, a private pool, tropical foliage, and the ever-present sound track of spitting sprinklers that keep the Bermuda grass green.

Spread over a large swath of acreage, Gala feels quiet at first. Beyond the towering, thatched-roof reception lodge, a plaza leads past two à la carte restaurants, an open-air sports bar, and the main buffet restaurant, toward the water. And that's where the action starts. A team of attractive young workers cajole a healthy slice of the Western world—I hear English, German, French, and what might be Swedish—into group activities. I'm barely sipping my first beer when a toned, tanned blonde begins trolling past husbands in beach chairs, barking, "Volleyball! Anybody for volleyball?" Meanwhile, the pool (one of four) churns with kids playing water polo under the spastic leadership of a female "animator," the title

many resorts give to employees in charge of activities (also known as animations).

And the adults who remain parked by the pool? They're ordering *dos piña coladas, por favor*. Two young couples from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, enjoy the last few hours of sun with a round of frozen cocktails and a game of hearts. They're part of a group of 37 Canadians who fled the cold via charter and have had a fabulous time, with one major exception: Fifteen of them caught Montezuma's revenge, a risk no matter where you stay in Mexico. "Other than that, it's the best vacation I've ever taken," says Kristin Harmel, 29.

Over at the bar, Carrie and Steve Wainwright, from Princeton Junction, N.J., wind down after a day at the beach. "We love Mexico because it's cheap," Carrie explains. With the help of a travel agent, they paid \$1,500 for five nights, including airfare. A Canadian supermarket VP jumps into the conversation to share his thoughts. "The resort next door is five times bigger," he says. "It's nice, but you'll lose 10 pounds walking from the beach to your room."

The Wainwrights were partly drawn by an article they read touting the wealth of off-campus offerings in the Yucatán—Mayan ruins, ATVs, horseback riding. "So we planned to do all kinds of stuff," Carrie says, then laughs. "But mostly we just sit on the beach." Gala Beach Resort Playacar, 877/888-4252, [galaresorts.com.mx](http://galaresorts.com.mx)

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## Riu Playacar

On the south end of Playa del Carmen, the Riu is an immense resort complex consisting of five properties: Riu Playacar, Riu Yucatán, Riu Tequila, Riu Lupita, and the luxe Riu Palace Mexico. It's a huge compound but not obnoxiously so, because the five resorts are somewhat self-contained. Guests can remain on the property they're staying at, or use the beaches, pools, restaurants, and bars at the other resorts. Actually, people staying at the fancy Palace have the run of the grounds, but those of us staying at the other resorts have to steer clear of the Palace. At check-in, the desk clerk takes out a map of the grounds and draws an X through the Palace, just to make the rules perfectly clear.

I'm staying at the Playacar, which has a French-Colonial feel, with wrought-iron railings and bar stools, pastel walls, tile roofs, and balconies. A deep, palm-dotted beach makes catching late-afternoon sun difficult, and a sea of topless French and Italian women jockey for position on the narrow stretch of sand that isn't shaded by palms. Unruly weather ate up a huge portion of the beach in late December, so now there's a mere 50 feet or so between the surf and the palms. The loss of open sand lends a South of France feel; most available space has been jam-packed

...mojitos are made fresh, mint and lime muddled before my eyes.

with lounge chairs. There's no drink service, and the beach bar is a bit of a hike from my towel, but I'm pleasantly surprised to find the mojitos made fresh, mint and lime muddled before my eyes.

Wisconsinites Peggy and Mike Block came last year for their 25th anniversary, loved the place—largely because it wasn't overwhelmed by kids—and came back this year with their daughters, Angela and Holly, who are in college. They paid \$4,400 for five nights, including airfare and transfers. After they booked, the hotel's room rates went on sale and their agent refunded them \$260.

The Blocks have fallen into an easy routine: Breakfast at 8 A.M., the beach at 9 A.M., lunch around noon, and on to the pool. "Then we have a few drinks," says Mike, offering me a beer. "Then eat, more drinks—we rarely see 11 P.M."

Like the people at all five resorts I visit, the Blocks can't say enough about the staff. "They do anything for you here," says Peggy, as hotel workers nearby rig up an outdoor movie screen to show a Packers vs. Vikings playoff game, much to the pleasure of not only the Blocks, but what feels like half of the state of Wisconsin hanging out in the bar. "If you've had a good time," Peggy explains, "why go someplace else?"

"We'll come back again," Mike agrees. "We feel comfortable here." *Hotel Riu Playacar, 888/666-8816, riu.com.*



Prices at these and other all-inclusive resorts vary dramatically depending on when and how you reserve. Packagers like Apple Vacations (book through a travel agent, [applevacations.com](http://applevacations.com)), Vacation Express (877/684-3786, [vacationexpress.com](http://vacationexpress.com)), and SunTrips (800/786-8747, [suntips.com](http://suntips.com)) are popular and generally offer good deals. Packages are also available through booking engines like Expedia and

Travelocity. And it's possible to reserve rooms (not with flights) directly through the resorts, though prices may not be as low. As always, the best way to get deals is by comparison shopping.

Once there, bear in mind that it's not all all-inclusive. At most resorts, one price gets you a room, unlimited food and drinks, nightly stage shows, and myriad activities. But there are exceptions. **Food:** You have free access to the buffet, plus snack bars, usually poolside. Most resorts parcel out two or three coupons for reservations at the à la carte restaurants. **Drinks:** At most resorts, local alcohol (beer, rum, and tequila), house wine, and low-end labels of foreign hard liquors are free, though some resorts also pour free from the top shelf. Rooms have complimentary minibars. **Sports:** Scuba diving and anything involving a motor—parasailing, Jet Skiing—cost extra. Expect to pay \$50–\$75 for motorsports and at least \$100 for scuba trips.



Map by Michael Newhouse





## Iberostar Paraiso del Mar

Part of another vast complex, this one about 15 minutes north of Playa del Carmen, the Iberostar is similar to the Riu in structure, with four properties of varying levels sharing facilities. There's the Paraiso Maya, Paraiso Lindo, Paraiso Beach, and Paraiso del Mar, where I'm staying; altogether, the four resorts have room for up to 3,000 guests.

The first thing I notice is the water. Shallow man-made canals flow in and around del Mar's marble-floored, open-air lobby, wind along the walks, and vanish into the tropical foliage. As I walk past the main restaurant, a white egret flies through a space between the thatched roofs and plucks a fish from the canal.

Outside the lodge, peacocks wander among the ferns, further lending the place a jungly vibe that extends to the pools. While pools at the other resorts tend to be bright and open, the main ones at the Iberostar are built to look like lakes and are surrounded by greenery. (A warning to those wary of walking: The path from lobby to beach, while beautiful, is about a half mile. A shuttle runs sporadically.)

If you love shade, this is your place. There's no need to rise early to get a chair under a *palapa*, which is where I find an ophthalmologist and his wife and three daughters (all the girls sport fresh cornrows) from the Toronto suburbs. The McGillivrays paid \$8,000 for seven days, airfare included, and two rooms

at the higher-end Iberostar Paraiso Maya. They've walked over to check out the del Mar's pool. "We usually take a ski vacation," says the dad, Daniel, kicking back in his lounge chair. "But we thought we'd try something different this year. And there are really only two places that have guaranteed 30 degrees: Mexico and the D.R." (Celsius, of course.)

Every hour offers another activity: water volleyball, Ping-Pong, dance instruction, target shooting with pellet guns, windsurfing lessons, water aerobics. That doesn't even include the entertainment, which is particularly entertaining here. When they're not prepping for the nightly show—typically, popular Broadway routines or local dances—the workers are hamming it up. A pack of guys dressed up as *Baywatch* babes surround me on the way to my room, and, for some unknown reason, jab and jeer at me in Spanish. In one show, "Hollywood stars" (including Indiana Jones, Mary Poppins, Batman and Robin, and Superman, who leaps off the two-story beach bar into the pool) attempt to rescue a man dressed as Marilyn Monroe from a guy with a shark fin on his back.

While watching this spectacle, I meet Robert and Stephanie Skinner, two 30-something Brits. They've flown 11 hours from Manchester and plan to "totally relax and recharge." It's clearly working. When I ask how long they've been here, Robert honestly has no idea what day it is. *Iberostar Paraiso del Mar*, 888/923-2722, [iberostar.com](http://iberostar.com).

A pack of guys  
dressed up as  
*Baywatch* babes  
surround me...



That's the ocean beyond the palms. Opposite, clockwise from far right: New York couple Eric and Nourit Klepar at the Tulum ruins; the schedule of activities; an "aqua aerobics" class





## Sunscape Tulum

The Sunscape Tulum Riviera Maya has a lot going for it. For one, size—or lack of it. With only 232 rooms, the Sunscape is what you might call a boutique all-inclusive. Resembling an elegant hacienda, the main cluster of buildings is yellow stucco; the insides have polished wood and whirring fans. A large rectangular pool, tiled in navy blue, is just steps from the lodge and abuts the resort's private cenote (a limestone freshwater sinkhole, also open for swimming). But perhaps its coolest feature is its proximity to the famed Mayan city of Tulum. The Sunscape is the southernmost resort before the coastline turns wild and winds in toward the ruins. From the horseshoe-shaped beach, which angles to the south and thus is sheltered from the Riviera's near-incessant eastern wind, you can see the faint outline of the main temples of Tulum, hazy rectangles atop a wooded cliff.

Each morning, a chipper resort employee (sorry, animator) leads guests on a 20-minute bike ride on a path alongside the 307 highway to the ruins. While streams of tourists pour from buses, we pay a shopkeeper five pesos to watch our bikes and stroll into one of the most sacred sites in the Yucatán. It's a spectacular cliffside spot overlooking cerulean waters, the Malibu of Mayan civilization.

In my group are two American couples leaving the property for the first time. They figure a morning bike ride is a great way to take in some off-property sites, not to mention justify that lunchtime margarita.

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Newlyweds Zach and Anne Ault are winding down what they call a perfect week-long honeymoon and will head back to Columbus, Ohio, tomorrow. "We basically told a travel agent we wanted to spend \$3,000, and we were given options," Anne explains. "Then we went on the Internet and checked them out." The Aults can't rave enough about the food. Though their preference is for the authentic Mexican food served at the resort, they've eaten plenty at the Sunscape's simple and delicious à la carte Italian, Japanese, and Pan-Asian restaurants. Whereas some all-inclusives allot only a few tickets per week for the à la carte joints, the Sunscape has no restrictions.

The other couple, two young New Yorkers originally from Israel, pose for photos in front of the magnificent temples. Eric and Nourit Klepar were supposed to spend a month in Thailand and would have arrived the week after the tsunami. For obvious reasons, plans changed and instead they split three weeks over three Mexican resorts, starting with the Sunscape. They both love the place but wish that there were more people their age around. "I think it would be very good for older couples," says Eric, "or if you had children."

Later, over lunch and mudslides, Zach and Anne agree that the Sunscape is quiet—but that's exactly what makes it a nice place to honeymoon. "If you're here to relax, it's perfect," Zach says. "There's a lot to do if you want to, but if you don't..." He takes his turn at shuffleboard and forgets to finish his thought. Sunscape Tulum, 866/786-7227, [sunscapecorps.com](http://sunscapecorps.com).





Guests learn a mix of Latin and line-dance moves to show off at Captain Morgan's disco later. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Nicholas, 4, and dad Jamie Gallant at the pool; the Barceló's mile-long beach; Italians playing bocce ball







## Barceló Maya

Fifteen miles south of Playa del Carmen, the Barceló Maya Beach Resort has 1,020 rooms and is situated on the largest beach by far of any resort I've visited. Beyond the long stretch of dedicated resort beach, lined by blue chairs, is another equally long span that's completely deserted, totaling more than a mile of white sand and swaying palms.

The facilities are a bit generic, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. Sitting at the lobby bar, with its jewelry shops and loud signs, I feel as if I'm waiting for a delayed flight. But the Barceló Maya is immaculate, and the staff is motivated to instigate fun.

Stephanie and Jamie Gallant, from Toronto, are sitting by the pool with their 4-year-old, Nicholas. The Gallants decided at the last minute that they needed to escape the Great White North. Stephanie's business partner had been to Barceló before and remembered there being an abundance of kids. "We did a lot of homework online about activities," says Jamie, "especially for our son." Nicholas, wearing a color-coordinated outfit and holding a pail with a shovel on a string, looks like he's been styled for a Visit Mexico! travel poster. Only two weeks prior to their departure, they paid \$2,880 for the three of them, including airfare.

On the beach-volleyball court, a pack of rowdy Italians do battle with a family from Wisconsin that has a

*...if you're not  
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just not trying.*

distinct advantage—two of the daughters play for their college teams. I strike up a conversation with Jon and Erica Guyer, a brother and sister from Detroit, who are on the sidelines. Jon's a freshman at Brown, and Erica is researching law on a Fulbright scholarship; they came to Barceló with their parents for a little family bonding. "We haven't taken a family vacation in a while," Erica says. "And we're really more city people; we don't usually do lie-out-on-the-beach-type trips."

As if on cue, mom Cheryl pulls up a chair. Mainly, she wanted to get the family together at a place where her husband, a physician, could "totally shut down and do nothing." So she consulted a Detroit travel agency that she trusted. "The Barceló had the biggest beach, with the most privacy," she says. They paid \$1,300 per person for seven nights.

At the moment, Jon and Erica are reclining with books, but soon they're on the volleyball court. Earlier, they kayaked, and later this afternoon they'll try windsurfing—their last sunny activity before winding down for dinner, drinks, and a show. Both admit to being skeptical when their mom initially presented the mega-resort idea. They've come to realize, however, that life at the Barceló Maya isn't all that bad. And it's become clear to me that if you're not having fun at an all-inclusive, you're just not trying. *Barceló Maya Beach Resort, 800/227-2356, barcelo.com.* ■